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Flexibility and Sensitivity to Local Concerns Are Crucial to Long-Term U.S. Security Relations with Iraq and Afghanistan

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The United States has a huge stake in the long-term development of Iraq and Afghanistan, having expended considerable diplomatic, economic, and military resources—not to mention the personal sacrifices of U.S. troops and civilians—pursuing security in these countries.

While the United States is currently focused on near-term stability, its long-term intentions remain in flux. In Iraq, it is building base infrastructure at the same time that its policymakers are debating exit strategies. It has signed a strategic partnership with Afghanistan, but that country remains a distant second to Iraq in terms of focus and resources—despite the fact that it is now the more violent and unstable of the two. Such mixed signals only increase the sense of threat and mistrust that people within each country and throughout the surrounding region feel over the prospect of continued U.S. engagement.

According to a study by RAND Project AIR FORCE, future security depends on the United States clarifying its long-term intentions toward Iraq, Afghanistan, and the region. Bilateral and multilateral security relationships will need to be robust enough to advance mutual interests, flexible enough to respond to emerging political conditions, and muted enough to avoid inflaming local sensitivities.

Bilateral Security Objectives Currently Coincide, but Outcomes Are Uncertain

Baghdad's and Kabul's security objectives largely overlap those of Washington. The major goals are for each country to maintain a moderate, representative government; manage its own security; preside over a growing market economy; develop as a partner for regional stability; and remain unified.

Abstract

The long-term intentions of the United States toward Iraq and Afghanistan are in flux. Clarifying the kinds of security relationships it intends to pursue is essential to securing stability and trust. Bilateral and multilateral security relationships will need to be robust enough to advance mutual interests, flexible enough to respond to emerging political conditions, and muted enough to avoid inflaming local sensitivities.

However, powerful forces could threaten either country's security or draw its politics away from U.S. interests. Local sensitivity to a U.S. presence is strong, especially in Iraq, where many people distrust the motives for the U.S. invasion and continued presence. In each country, sectarianism, terrorism, insurgency, crime, and corruption erode confidence in the central government. This leaves each country open to meddling by neighbors, who may stir up ethnic or religious factions or try to wrest the country away from Western influence.

The United States should be prepared to adjust the type and level of security relationship it offers each country in response to changing political conditions. At the same time, such cooperation can help ensure that Iraq and Afghanistan grow more secure and remain cooperative with the West.

The United States Should Be Prepared to Offer Baghdad a Strong Situational Partnership

A *situational partnership* allows ad hoc cooperation on limited objectives without committing

either country to an enduring or broader security relationship. In Iraq, a situational partnership would focus on such activities as training, equipping, and advising the Iraqi security forces and building infrastructure. A key part of the relationship would be to reassure Iraqis that the United States does not intend to maintain a major military presence in their country. U.S. use of Iraqi military facilities should be based on mutual agreement and should eschew both the image and reality of permanent military presence. Such a relationship would have advantages for both sides: The Iraqi leadership would avoid appearing too closely tied to the United States, and the United States would avoid the appearance of endorsing the Iraqi regime should it become more authoritarian or radical.

The United States Should Seek a More Detailed, Resourced Strategic Partnership with Kabul

A *strategic partnership* advances mutual security interests on many issues on an enduring basis. Afghans would welcome such a relationship. From Kabul's perspective, the existing U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership is vague about Washington's commitment. A stronger relationship should be defined that would be based on mutual interests and needs and that would reassure Afghans that the United States has a long-term commitment to underwriting their country's security and self-determination. The parties should emphasize that the strategic partnership is dedicated to securing Afghanistan, integrating it with the region as a stabilizing force, and helping address areas of disagreement and common concerns between Kabul and its neighbors.

The United States Should Encourage a Cooperative, Multilateral Regional Security Framework

Neighboring countries are concerned about U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the short term, they fear that sectarian tensions, jihadi veterans, or refugees could spill over from those countries. In the longer term, they fear that the United States could be enabling offensive capabilities, especially in Iraq, thus creating new strategic threats in the region. Iran also fears that the U.S. invasion of Iraq may set a precedent that only a nuclear weapons capability can over-

turn. These concerns make it all the more important for the United States to be transparent about its actions and intentions and to focus on defensive capabilities in its security relations with Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States should also encourage regional dialogue about Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly in a multilateral framework based on cooperation on "soft" issues (e.g., disaster relief, educational exchanges).

The U.S. Air Force Will Play a Central Role

The U.S. armed forces are already engaged in training, equipping, advising, and assisting activities as well as direct operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) helps to build indigenous air power and provides combat and operational support to friendly forces.

The goal of USAF assistance is to enable Iraqi and Afghan air forces to stand on their own. The USAF can further this goal by advocating for increased, sustained resources in this area. In working with indigenous air forces, it should encourage plans for long-term sustainment, including the development of organizations, leaders, aircrew, maintainers, base support capabilities, and a training pipeline. As with U.S. security relations in general, the USAF should emphasize the development of defensive capabilities and should be prepared to limit its own activities if political or security conditions change.

The USAF Should Prepare for High Demand

U.S. ground forces may begin withdrawing well before the Iraqi and Afghan air arms are able to operate independently, leaving the USAF as the main provider of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; airlift; close air support; strikes on high-value targets; and deterrence of external coercion and aggression. The USAF must be prepared for a high operational tempo in and around Iraq and Afghanistan. This includes preparing an appropriate rotation base, shoring up manning in high-demand fields, and expanding training programs. The USAF should also explore options to secure its own modernization, so that it is not forced to mortgage future capabilities to pay for expensive ongoing operations. Preparing for an essential role in Iraq and Afghanistan will set an appropriate context for planning and programming in the years to come. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Future U.S. Security Relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan: U.S. Air Force Roles*, by David E. Thaler, Theodore W. Karasik, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Frederic Wehrey, Obaid Younossi, Farhana Ali, and Robert A. Guffey, MG-681-AF, 2008, 182 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8330-4197-5 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG681/>). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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